

An Atlas of Fertilization and Karyokinesis of the Ovum (1895), by Edmund Beecher Wilson ^[1]

By: Gleason, Kevin M. Keywords: Fertilization ^[2] Cell Biology ^[3] Development ^[4]

[Edmund Beecher Wilson](#) ^[5] in the US published *An Atlas of Fertilization and Karyokinesis of the Ovum* (hereafter called *An Atlas*) in 1895. The book presents photographs by photographer Edward Leaming that capture stages of [fertilization](#) ^[6], the fusion of [sperm](#) ^[7] and [egg](#) ^[8] and early development of [sea urchin](#) ^[9] (*Toxopneustes variegatus*) ova, or [egg](#) ^[8] cell. Prior to *An Atlas*, no one photographed of [egg](#) ^[8] cell division in clear detail. Wilson obtained high quality images of [egg](#) ^[8] cells by cutting the cells into thin sections and preserving them throughout different stages of development. *An Atlas* helped Wilson develop methods to present key stages of [fertilization](#) ^[6] and development, which he later used in his textbook *The Cell in Development and Inheritance*, first published in 1896. Furthermore, *An Atlas* was the first publication to present accurate images of the [fertilized egg](#) ^[10] cell during early stages of development.

Wilson studied cells in the US during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. In his three editions of *The Cell in Development and Inheritance* ^[11], Wilson organized a vast amount of research related to the cell, including information regarding its structure and its role in cellular development and genetic inheritance. Wilson spent the majority of his career at [Columbia University](#) ^[12] in New York City, New York, where he worked with photographer Edward Leaming in 1885. At the time, Leaming was a medical doctor and an instructor of photography at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at [Columbia University](#) ^[12].

Wilson published *An Atlas* during a period of many developments in the study of cells. In 1875, researcher Oscar Hertwig in Germany discovered that the [nucleus](#) ^[13] of the [sperm](#) ^[7] cell unites with the [nucleus](#) ^[13] of an [egg](#) ^[8] cell to form a single parent [nucleus](#) ^[13] called a cleavage-[nucleus](#) ^[13]. Hertwig and other cell researchers during the nineteenth century presented their discoveries in text and often included drawings or other diagrams to illustrate, but nearly all lacked photographs. Prior to Wilson's *An Atlas*, other scientists had published photographs of [egg](#) ^[8] cells. However, Wilson claimed that their images had unacceptably blurry resolution.

Wilson's *An Atlas* consists of a preface, a general introduction, and a descriptive section. In the preface and general introduction, Wilson provides background information regarding the book as well as an overview of its contents. In the descriptive section, Wilson presents photographs and diagrams of the [egg](#) ^[8] cell throughout different stages of development. In that section, Wilson includes a total of forty photographs on ten photographic plates. Wilson presents them with respect to the order in which the stages occur during [fertilization](#) ^[6]. The first plate contains images of the [egg](#) ^[8] cell prior to [fertilization](#) ^[6]. Subsequent plates contain images of the various stages of [fertilization](#) ^[6], and the last plate contains photographs of the newly divided cells after [fertilization](#) ^[6].

In Wilson's preface, he explains developments in the study of cells during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Those developments included increased explanations of the [fertilization](#) [6] of the [egg](#) [8] and of how nuclei divide. Because those phenomena require microscopes to observe them, Wilson states that it is difficult to teach the subject to a wide audience. Wilson says that scientists typically represent microscopic phenomena in texts as drawings. However, he claims that drawings are a subjective form of visual aid due their reliance on the artist's interpretation of natural events. He then explains that he uses photographs rather than illustrations in *An Atlas* to depict cells because photographs, unlike drawings, provide an objective representation of cellular phenomena.

Wilson concludes the preface by stating the methods he and Leaming used to obtain the photographs. The methods included cutting very thin sections of a [sea urchin](#) [9] (*Toxopneustes variegatus*) [egg](#) [8] cells during key stages in development and preserving and staining them to make cellular structures visible when viewed through a [microscope](#) [14]. By cutting the cells into thin sections, Wilson and Leaming obtained high resolution images and avoided the blurry image problem that others had encountered years before. Following Wilson's preface, Leaming provides a more technical explanation of the photographic techniques employed, such as the lens that he used and details about the exposure and focus used to obtain the photographs.

In the general introduction of *An Atlas*, Wilson discusses [fertilization](#) [6] and karyokinesis, the division of the cleavage-[nucleus](#) [13]. Wilson explains that the introductory section of *An Atlas* aims for an audience of students and general readers. He provides a brief summary of the union of [egg](#) [8] and [sperm](#) [7] nuclei and the distribution of genetic material during the maturation, [fertilization](#) [6], and division, also called cleavage, of the [egg](#) [8] cell.

Following the introductory section, Wilson transitions into a descriptive section, where he presents the plates containing the photographs alongside text describing the stages of [fertilization](#) [6]. In addition to the photographs, Wilson includes [camera lucida](#) [15] drawings that were rendered from the photographs. Camera lucida is a drawing aid that uses mirrors to superimpose the subject of a drawing onto a separate drawing surface, which enables an artist to trace a photo-realistic illustration. Despite his initial criticisms about the drawbacks of drawings, Wilson states that his are unlike typical scientific drawings in that his use of a [camera lucida](#) [15] provides an accurate representation of the real object. Wilson also acknowledges that drawings can provide better textual context when carefully constructed and refined to produce an ideal model of the phenomena being described.

Many recognized the importance of Wilson's *An Atlas* for the study and teaching of cellular biology. In 1895, author Charles Sedgwick Minot at [Harvard Medical School](#) [16] in Boston, Massachusetts, published a book review in the journal *Science* describing Wilson's work as being one of the most notable productions of pure science in the US. In another book review published in 1896 by the *British Medical Journal*, the editors credit Wilson and Leaming with providing a valuable series of images and illustrations.

The images Wilson used in *An Atlas* influenced his later work. In his book *The Cell in Development and Inheritance* first published in 1896, Wilson presented drawings and diagrams based on the photographs he and Leaming had included in *An Atlas*. Wilson and Leaming's photographic techniques also went on to provide a new method of scientific illustration of biological processes.

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Subject

Wilson, Edmund B. (Edmund Beecher), 1856-1939 [28] Leaming, Edward, 1861-1916 [29] Karyokinesis [30] Caryocinesis [31] Nuclear division (Cytology) [32] Fertilization (Biology) [33] Conception [34] Developmental biology [35] Photographs [36] Columbia University/City University of New York [37] Sperm-ovum interactions [38] Cell Nucleus Division [39] Ovum [40]

Topic

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